



P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Steve Halle (Palatine, Illinois, USA) & Adam Fieled (Philly, USA)

Editor:

- Adam Fieled

SH: Useful concepts. I want to respond on Keats' Negative Capability, which I think introduced several useful concepts into modern poetics, and also served as a birthplace for the non-lyric/non-Romantic (I guess what you'd call "post-avant") lineage alive in contemporary poetics. First, I view Keats as the odd Romantic, along with Shelley. Whereas Shelley validated the entry of politics into poetry, Keats rebelled against the first wave of Romantics by heightening the power of the imagination and downplaying Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime."

The imaginative poetry Keats penned allowed for oddly juxtaposed words; in his Odes, *Nightingale* & *Grecian Urn*, for example; in order to create a reflection of his state of mind. Even though these two poems work in a highly stylized and rhetorical way, they reflect on Keats' consciousness— the power of imagination and the untranslatable power of the mind to hold disparate concepts without struggle. The idea of negative capability is also (ironically) an example of negative capability because neither Keats, nor anyone since, has presented, as far as I know, a good reason why some people embrace mystery and some people need closure.

"Indeterminacy" in poetry, it seems to me, is another big point of contention among experimentalists today, and I would assert that Keats' negative capability is the concept which paved the way for indeterminate poetics. I believe a relationship exists between the misinterpretation of "first thought, best thought" and the misuse of negative capability. People like to assume that Ginsberg, Kerouac and the Beats meant "first word, best word" or "first draft, best draft" and use their teachings, which are highly formulated methods for improvisational poetry, to justify writing whatever comes to mind. As we see with Bukowski, a poet who edited little (if at all), this work sometimes succeeds, often falls flat. The same is true for indeterminate poets whose work lacks closure. I think some poets misuse negative capability or "rejection of closure" as a means to avoid striving or thinking about

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their work. Poets who misuse negative capability think they can avoid essence, substance and arrival, but I think this is a big mistake because it fools poets into thinking they don't need intention or investigation and can operate solely on intuition.

Keats is also perhaps the first poet to address the idea that language is unsatisfactory for expressing ideas completely (though Shelley suggested this too). As skilled as any poet may be as word-smith, the poem will still be lacking to the thing-in-itself: be it the real triggering element of the poem or some abstract or intense thought or sensation the poet tries to grasp. Through negative capability and his understanding of the powers of and limitations of art, Keats may have been the earliest antecedent to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of this century. Language poets, of course, understood the fallibility of linguistic expression, so they began to work with language the way a painter might work with paints, allowing for pure linguistic abstraction and/or frustration, depending on whose side you're on. Critics sometimes call Keats a "mood" poet, meaning that every single word did not have to make total logical sense in the poem. Instead, Keats' linguistic consistency depended upon creating the desired mood, a different way of hitting "the just note": *le mot juste*.

Previous to Lang-po, I look at Keats as having laid the groundwork for the High Modernists, especially Wallace Stevens, who tried and perhaps failed as much as Keats did to create "poetry of imagination" or "supreme fiction." Like Keats, Stevens valued the imagination of the maker over the rational mind, even though I feel that Stevens, again like Keats, often wrote rational and calculated poems. Keats' influence and the influence of negative capability cannot be overstated in an existence wherein making rational sense of everyday life, let alone the "big questions," is nearly impossible.

AF: I take most of your points. The one problem I have with the schema that would put Keats behind Language Poetry and post-avant is that one could make a valid argument that Keats, bent as he was on Romantic (maybe post-Romantic) ideas of personal feeling and personal expression, pursued aims antithetical to these movements. It helps to remember that Keats mentioned negative capability in a letter, and he was referring to Shakespeare and Shakespeare's dramatic technique, rather than his own poetry, which is rooted very much in Romantic explorations of self and self-hood (whether this is done obliquely, as in *Grecian Urn*, or directly, as in *Nightingale* and his great sonnets.) In theory, Negative Capability (and its implicit ancillary devices, non-linearity, allusiveness, abstruse tangent writing, deferral of personal expression, etc.) fits in snugly to the post-modern ethos that dictates what many of us do. But negative capability doesn't factor as much into Keats' own poetry as most people tend to assume. Even when he steps beyond the personal, it is often to challenge a historical figure— *Hyperion* is a direct response to Milton—or to tell a

richly detailed but essentially linear story, as in *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*. So, I like the connection of Keats to Stevens and post-avant, and I'm willing to give it some cred, but for me, Lord Byron takes the "proto-post-modern" cake. Remember that extreme self-obsession (like extreme impersonality, or anything extreme, in fact) is also a common post-modern trope—think of the self-mythologizing of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Tracy Emin, Robert Mapplethorpe, not to mention poets like Bukowski and Ginsberg, and before them Williams and Pound. Byron's complete and often facetious self-absorption (pushed knowingly to the point of self-parody) paved the way for the "art of celebrity culture" or "art-in-kitsch" which dictates so much of what we've seen in the past fifty years (in the multi-media continuum of the aesthetic.)

SH: About the Net: the pros of the Internet poetry boom far outweigh the cons, i.m.h.o. It suits modern (United States) societal impulses to be able to get what you want, when you want it. In your case and mine, we publish virtually what we want, when we want to. In that sense, it's gratifying. We don't have to sift through mountainous submissions piles. As far as publishing our own work, 'zines and blogs can offer instant gratification to us like no print outlet can.

The "con" of instant gratification would seem to be instant disposability. A plethora of information means we face a choosier readership. When you purchase a print journal or collection, the tendency is to read it: it was a "monied" choice. As for my blog, people have to want to read what's there. If they aren't interested, they're a mouse click away from something different. You and I have both discussed new poetry and the prospect of the old theme of immortality through verse. I think it's pointless to think about, because we can easily lose focus on what's important: the real work we do. The value of the lifestyle we lead (internet or not) is in doing the work, the process. I think your outlook on this might differ from mine, but I respect even the untrained poet because, essentially, he/she is getting the same benefits from doing the work as I am, regardless of poetic knowledge, lineage, theory or literary history. That's not to say I find untrained poets' work interesting. More than likely, the opposite is true, but I think I can quickly discern whether or not anyone will challenge my intellect, which is a big draw for me.

In addition to the instant gratification/instant disposability dichotomy the Internet establishes, the possibility of e-books excites me. I like materials and mobility. The combination of those two things is exciting. For the poems I write now, especially "investigative" poems, I like to have synthetic linguistic fragments or ideas handy. The Internet, and its ever-growing portability, enhances these desires for me. It's the old "writerly" advice I've heard from a number of sources: always have a book, a pen and paper on hand. With notebook computers and wi-fi technology, I can have all three in one. And given the trend of technology to shrink, portability will only

increase. William Allegrezza's *moria* e-books are quite exciting because I can access them from virtually anywhere. The authors he publishes sacrifice money for hit counts. I think I'm resigned to the idea I'll never get rich off the po-biz game, so I'd rather publish an e-book that gets 3000 hits a month than make \$3000 from a print book no one reads. The attention span and eye-training it takes to read an e-book will develop, as well.

The fact of the matter is, the Internet is the hub of the counterculture. This is where you *MUST* be if you write differently, think differently or live differently; our circle of avant-minded poets populates the Internet. The only way around its importance is with "eminence," which few younger poets can claim. The Internet is the only way around the taste-making large-scale corporations like Borders and Barnes and Noble. They don't carry much counterculture material *per se*; they're looking for commodities.

AF: All good points and taken. One thing I would add about the Net is its international aspect. How else could we be in daily contact with poets in Mexico, Canada, England and Australia? This, I think, is the key to the success of *Jacket* and *Otoliths*. All artists have a need for commonality, to be part of a community larger than the small milieus that they generally, inevitably inhabit. *Jacket* has been instrumental in turning post-avant from a plethora of small, insular groups into a unified, international whole. This also applies to *Otoliths*. Between them, we have two publications that everyone, or almost everyone, in the post-avant community reads. The consolidation/unification of post-avant is almost entirely due to the influence of the Net. Centrist poetry can lay claim to no such unity. Do English, Australian, and Canadian Centrist poets read American Centrist journals, and vice versa? I would wager that they don't. *Ploughshares* in London? What I think post-avant really needs (and *Otoliths* is part of the way there) is a print equivalent of *Jacket*. If we could get in print what's already in motion on the Web, we'd really be poised for world domination.

SH: Where does post-avant poetry need to go and why does it need to go there?

This is a difficult question. I'm going to approach it from two angles, and then go on my own tangent. First, Ray Bianchi has said in conversation that post-avant poetry (I think he called it "experimental") needs an audience aside from poets. He compared post-avant poetics to contemporary visual art and avant-garde jazz, both of which he feels have an audience, albeit small ones, outside of the artists themselves. Regarding avant-garde jazz or improvised music or whatever they're calling it right now, I agree with Ray. Many of the local improvised music concert series in Chicago draw good-sized crowds. Sure, many of the non-musicians who go to these shows are artists, and experimental artists, in other fields, but it is an audience separate from

the makers themselves; this is of utmost importance. People often compare modern poetics to a self-perpetuating system or “closed circle.” Post-avant seems to be an elaborately staged version of that. Even though mainstream poetry is not commercially hot, I believe occasional readers of poetry tend to buy what Barnes & Noble carries on its brick and mortar store shelves. It’s a scary thought if you’re an experimental or “post-avant” writer. B&N tends to carry only the APR/Poetry crowd and their predecessors.

Additionally, there’s a big current push to encourage poets to make “more accessible poems.” You and I have talked about creating a middle path between extremely experimental and Centrist work, but I’m not sure we’ve settled on an answer. Poetry, in its loftiest manifestations, must work to move human linguistic and artistic expression forward. Partisans seems almost to suggest reversion to more basic creations, to expand the public’s interest in verse culture. I think it’s a dangerous idea. We first must answer this question: what do we (as poets) and everyone else (potential readers) want from poetry? I myself want poetry to live up to other art forms. What I mean is, poetry seems to be years behind other art modes (visual art, avant jazz specifically), with notable forward-thinking exceptions like Gertrude Stein and her aesthetic progeny. “New Thing” jazz started happening in the mid 1960s; Abstract Expressionism in art in the 1950s. What is the poetic equivalent of these, and when did it come into fashion? Assuming Language poetry could start that answer off.

Post-avant poetry, also, might be the answer to that question in a general way (or at least some of its subsections.) I don’t feel that post-avant needs to reach toward the mainstream. Eventually the mainstream and post-avant or experimental poetics will merge— that seems to be the trend. When will this happen? Not for a while. I’ve generally heard it said that any move to anthologize poets is way behind the current trends in poetics, sometimes 50 years behind. Pierre Joris’ and Jerome Rothenberg’s *Poems for the Millennium* is perhaps the closest thing to an “anthology of the now” we have in poetry, and I don’t think it’s up-to-the-minute. Anthologies bring experimental verse to the classroom and seal its canonization. That’s the path to mainstream readership and exposure to non-poet readers. Perhaps moves toward online anthologizing and the instantaneous possibility of the Internet will help post-avant poetry.

Speculation aside, I don’t know if I’m as distressed about post-avant’s lack of non-poet readership. I see a great amount of high-quality work emerging from the post-avant community, especially through editing *Seven Corners*. I like the directions post-avant is headed in: investigative poetics, destabilization of the egotistical sublime, improvisational poetics, contingent poetics, synthetic language, multilingual poetry, expanded translation, re-co-opting language through political-

poetic experimentation, etc.—important and interesting stuff, for my money. I'm sure you notice the same thing in *P.F.S. Post*— the poets are there, the work is good, what else can we ask for? The commitment should always be to doing the work, the "real work" as Gary Snyder would say. If the work is good, the readership will follow. For me, being a poet, post-avant or otherwise, is about the process of it all, the practice, the involvement with the art and the critical discussion that it creates.

AF: I think "process orientation" is indeed important, much more than the petty rat-race that poets (myself included) often get sucked into. My own particular preference would be towards a new kind of formalism. When you say formalism, people think you mean rhyming poems, odes and Shakespearean sonnets. I don't mean that at all. For me, formalism means, quite simply, the willingness and devoted impetus to create new forms, whether they involve conventional melopoeia or not. For me, Picasso was the ultimate formalist, though he's been tagged "Cubist" and lots of other things. Formalism ties in to seriality, working in series; you create a new form, then bend it and twist it every which way; exploring, seeing what works, milking it. Picasso spent decades proceeding in this fashion; as did Matisse, Monet, Braque, lots of the best visual artists. I suppose you could call Robert Creeley a serial poet—he came up with a signature style, and then most of his poems became (for the most part) variations on a theme. O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* are another good example of serial poetry composition. Yet, no one talks about Creeley or O'Hara as formalists, because, again, formalism is associated with archaisms, tepid retreads of old forms. New forms means a new language, however (as you said) oddly juxtaposed.

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Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Chris McCabe (London, UK), Adam Fieled (Philadelphia, USA)

By e-mail exchange, Autumn 2005

Editor:

- Adam Fieled

Artist Posts

Adam Fieled: ‘You use a lot of humor in your poems. It’s an all-purpose kind of humor that can be directed any which way— towards George W. Bush, for instance, or towards yourself, or towards the act of creating a poem. How much of this is conscious? Do your favorite poets tend to be “cut-ups”?’

Chris McCabe: I’ve never really thought of myself as using humor, in the sense of a deliberate, literary device which attempts to have an effect on a reader. It seems obvious to me that poems that set out to be funny, once you’ve identified the poet’s intentions, fall flat and fail. The traditional vehicle for the ‘humorous poem’ is narrative, which doesn’t interest me at all: I’m much more interested in fusing together the seemingly disparate, crude bathos, clashes of cultural registers and any other shock tactics that can, first and foremost, surprise me as the writer. Dr. Johnson’s comment that Donne took “the most heterogeneous ideas and yoked together by violence” is relevant here. Being from Liverpool (a city famous for its humor) and writing poetry, strangely doesn’t offer any legacy in terms of a more challenging poetics. The territory ends with McGough and The Mersey Poets and all that ponytailed twee-ness. A lot of my poems seems to come about through the making of a connexion, for example George W. Bush & the Wizard of Oz, which interests me more than attempting to get a laugh. Obviously, humor can be used as a kind of survival tactic (certainly in Liverpool, a blinker against the memory of the slave trade), a communal ethic of moving on. There’s no great theory to this, but things are either funny to me because they make me laugh or because it generates a response against something that scares the living shit out of me. It was only five days after the recent London bombings when I heard the first joke made about it on television. It was a huge tension reliever. In this sense, the politic poems that I’ve written have probably used humor as a way of dealing with The Fear.

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My favourite poets all tend to use speed (harder, quicker, faster) as an element in their writing, but I wouldn't say they are distinguished by "cut-ups." Dadaism was an incredibly important movement, and one I go back to from time-to-time, but the idea of using this technique without some interesting form of intervention has probably had its day. I'm more interested in the effect that television has had on the development of the minds of people of my generation (the MTV generation) and the ability this brings to be able to soak up great streams of images and messages and still be able to read them critically. Poetry as a potentially more meaningful form of channel-hopping. Randomness and synchronicity is the everyday experience of dealing with life in the city and there's little chance of a slow, closed, conventional poem doing much for anyone who's just spent a few hours trawling the internet on broadband. Mimetically our minds have been altered by these massive cultural shifts and I feel that poetry needs to change to retain the capacity to surprise and capture the imagination.

AF: You've published your first book at a relatively young age. As a fellow twenty-something poet, I was wondering if you could talk about how it feels to be playing what's traditionally seen as an old man's game. Have you felt your youth to be a liability or an asset?

CM: Age seems to work on a different dimension in the poetry world, with poets under the age of forty usually being classified as 'young'. In a recent Poetry Society-sponsored Next Generation promotion (the corporate spawn of the original Pod People) the cut off age for a young poet was, I think, 55! In relation to that I suppose I'm comfortably in the young bracket, though I've had an extra 10 years to think poetry through and make decisions on which direction to take it than, say, Rimbaud or the MacSweeney of 'The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of his Mother.' They are examples of precociousness on a preternatural level. I think the reality is that, although poetry has been traditionally an 'old man's game' (this of course refers to the centuries of closed doors to women writers) much of the best poetry that's been written has been done by young poets. The argument bootied against young writers is that they haven't got the life experience to actually have anything meaningful to say. This may be true if you're interested only in a confessional, story-based, wizened kind of writing, but if poetry's going to come directly from the poet's experience in life — sourced by the fabric of a variety of culturally experienced factors — then it's in youth that the future is embraced and the past not held close as a personal Golden Age. What comes next is valued more than what went before. This appeals to me as I'm interested in poetry of the present tense as opposed to a poetry that foists a nostalgia for the past. It's also the case that younger writers can draw from developments and new directions in technology, music, film and, of course, the language itself, that might strike older poets as alien.

There's nothing more detrimental to a poet's output than the self-assurance that comes with certain publication. Poetry's dominated by staid, complacent poets living off the glory of successful, earlier work. They don't need to push themselves as middle-of-the-road stuff will do. They won't take chances as this might lead to their publisher actually reading their work and becoming critical of it. Of course there are exceptions to this, and I've got great respect for Geoffrey Hill and late-career risk-taking of 'Speech! Speech!' and 'The Orchards of Syon'. Resonant, meaningful work that smacks of now-ness. There are also exceptions to publishers and SALT, the publisher of 'The Hutton Inquiry', are interested only in the merits and energy inherent in the body of work itself. This might seem like an obvious starting point for larger poetry publishers, but SALT are something of an exception - at least in the UK.

In terms of getting published in the first place youth is a real liability. Mediocre work by an established poet will nearly always be published before more exciting work by an unknown. However, if you're trying to write because you believe in the work, for the sensation of pinning down the never-before-said and in attempt to push the boundaries of poetry as it's understood, then youth is a distinct advantage. This doesn't mean that you've got less to lose though. Paul Morley talks in 'Words and Music' of how trying to create the genuinely new when you start off in a band is far more risky than changing direction when you've got 'a name': you don't risk giving up a reputation, you risk never having one in the first place. The same could be applied to young poets. If you can deal with this possibility though, then it's as a young writer that you'll have the energy, playfulness, insight and rebellious capacity to attempt to forge out a [distinctive kind of poetics](#). The ultimate aim would be to keep such a fresh outlook and perspective throughout an entire writing life.

AF: Your "Progress Poems" work on many levels. They're frequently directed at specific individuals (often literary icons), and seem to play up the ironies inherent in "progressive thinking", but they could also be taken straight. Could you talk a little bit about how this series developed, at what point you decided to call them "Progress Poems," etc.?

CM: This sequence was named "progress poems" from its moment of conception, but at that point, it was to be only a temporary title i.e. 'work in progress'. There were a few stray directions in my thinking that seemed to come together at the same time, both poetically and politically. I was reading a great deal of very different poetry at the time and was thinking of ways in which it might be possible, if at all possible, to write something that might be genuinely 'new.' I was kind of conceding that every possible novel direction that poetry could take had probably already happened, and all that was left was to play around with the pieces. I didn't find this thought as deadening as I might have done and it seemed to free up and, in a way, liberate the decisions that I could make when putting together what I considered to

be a poem. I wrote the poems between January and about September 2003, following closely (with everyone else) the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq. It was insane how often the word ‘progress’ was used during this time, by both Blair and Bush, to justify their moral-ethical crusading. The more convinced they seemed of taking the world into a better place the more obvious it was – or at least it seemed, to everyone else – how dangerous and corrupt was their ideology. It set me off on the notion of progress as that ideology arrogantly put forward by the powers-that-be of every generation to justify their own idea of themselves as ultimately modern and to further their own careers. That the notion of everyone together moving forward in a society at any one time is a fallacy. The Industrial Revolution would be a classic example of this: the nine year old boy under the factory machine in 1803, asleep with nine blackened fingers on his hands. I started to collect quotes from all kinds of people from different periods on the idea of ‘progress’ and to put them together to see what patterns came about. The sequence starts with some of these. My favorite was the Tony Blair one: “the great thing about the human spirit is that it never gives up and that is how we make progress.” This very surreal time in history was a mind-fuck for me in that my Dad was very ill with cancer (the book is dedicated to his memory), and when I look back at this sequence there is a kind of manic energy to these poems that I can’t quite account for.

In terms of the form for these poems I suppose I just wanted to show myself that a poem could come about from anything at all (bar nothing). Inspiration is what happens when you make connexions. I gave all of the poems random numbers between 1 and 2,000 and pictured the whole sequence as an internet search engine response to the word ‘progress.’ As there’s no place to progress to, the sequence would be randomly jumbled and might suitably disappear up its own arsehole. I might get lucky in the trawl though and if not write something genuinely new, at least write something I could call a ‘poem’ (I saw Charles Bernstein’s ‘The Sophist’ for the first time after I’d finished these poems and really identified with the idea of a book of poems containing multitudes of genres). The first publication of the poems was fitting for its composition. The poet Peter Philpott took a group of about 20 poems for his ezine [Great Works](#) and jumbled them into his own order. He later added another 50 or so poems and put them into numerical order, which as they weren’t written or planned to be like this, was also a kind of randomness. I’ve enjoyed doing readings since then in which I’ve flicked through the sequence and read any random poem that I’ve landed on, then moved on to lucky-dip another. The strange interrelations and juxtapositions that have come about from this have interested me although it is also possible that I’ve inadvertently undercut my own project with more subconscious patterning in the poems than I realized.

AF: Where publishing is concerned, print vs. online seems to be the big debate now among younger poets. Where do you stand? Having been in a lot of online journals (Argotist, Great Works, etc.), do you find online publishing satisfying?

CM: I'd say that, broadly speaking, there's a further division among younger poets based upon the kind of poetry they're writing. This is in no way a truism but in my experience I have found that the more open-ended and experimental the poetry, the more the potential of cyberspace will be embraced. This is obvious in a way: if you hold the conventional close then you're probably likely to reach for conventional methods of publication (i.e. printed matter). There's also a certain inverted logic among technophobic poets that because 'anyone' can make a website, then publishing poetry online isn't really publishing at all. It might not occur to them that with Desk Top Publishing within reach of the average western poet, anyone can make a book as well. What publication in either place will come down to is the judgement of an editor, which does not (or should not) change depending on the medium.

What the web offers is instantaneousness. If somebody should want to read my poetry they don't have to find out the publication details, publisher, ISBN, order the book and wait for it to arrive on their mat. I can give them a URL, mail them a link, and it's there in front of them asking for no VISA details. The speed is there without the comfort. What's often forgotten with books though is just what amazing pieces of technology they actually are. Diverse, compact, portable: I don't leave home without one. For me, both forms of publication bring different possibilities and it's never been a case of one against the other. The physical feel of a book (colour, weight, smell, sensations, portability) are certainly not threatened by a monitor and a clunk of plastic in your hand. What the internet does offer though is not only a potentially much larger readership (especially compared to small print-runs of magazines) but also a much wider one. Online communities are based upon shared interests to the detriment of other obstacles, such as location, physical appearance and even language. What I've also found fascinating is the experience of somebody latching onto a poem because they are interested in its subject - its straightforward content - and not just because it is a poem. They would never have looked inside a poetry magazine or book to find it in the first place. Where your poems could only be browsed in book form, they can now be searched and weeded out by people with massively different interests. It's also worth pointing out to poets who are skeptical of poetry on the internet (who won't of course, be reading this) that there is a whole generation coming through who will look to the internet to find about contemporary poets. If you don't Google, you don't exist. Personally, I'm always hugely satisfied with being published online. No more or less than in book form. It means somebody's liked my work enough to go to the effort of getting it out there and that it then has the potential to be read by people. After the initial buzz of

writing something you're happy with, these are the two most important things for a writer. Or should be anyway.

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Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Andrew Duncan (Nottingham, UK), Adam Fieled (Philadelphia, USA)

Editor:

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By e-mail exchange, Autumn 2005

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Adam Fieled: Formally, the paratactic quality of your lines could align you with the Language poetry movement. Nevertheless, the narrative element in your poems is strong enough that one feels moved from "A" straight through to "Z" by them. Are you conscious of a dichotomy here between narrative movement and paratactic "zig-zags," or is this an unconscious process?

Andrew Duncan: I did quite a lot of work on parataxis at one stage of my life. The basic information I found was that it has strong associations with working-class speech, and that dialect writing has very infrequent parataxis. This was asserted of Vulgar Latin, 2000 years ago, so it is quite a deep distinction. I find this difficult to square with its presence in LANGUAGE poetry, written by people presumably of high educational levels. I would say that its presence in my writing correlates with listening to rock music and folk song a great deal. There is probably a link between parataxis and lines which are complete in themselves, without enjambement— like all song and all early poetry. I don't think the decision about movement through a poem is conscious, although it is part of the process of composing every line. MAK Halliday coined the term "cohesion" to cover the area which includes decisions about parataxis, syntaxis, and hypotaxis, which probably has a lot to do with the question "is this a null and stupid line break or a good one." This is a large topic!

Basil Bernstein used parataxis as a key component in his theory of language and class. Bernstein was trying to answer the question "why do children from income groups D and E do incredibly badly in anonymous written State exams" in terms of a gap between their language and the language of the classroom and exams. Other linguists misheard the message as "lower-class speech is poor in information," got upset, and threw away the key question about academic success and social mobility.

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- Adam Fieled (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania)

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Science failed here because emotions became too violent. If you get a room of British people talking about these issues, they will very rapidly split into two groups who don't want to listen to each other!

Where science fails, older and darker subsystems come into play. There was a stage (say 1968-75?) when sociology, and socio-linguistics, seemed able to provide the solutions to the problems tormenting society. A lot of people got involved with them as a means of carrying out political commitments. The instrument seems to have broken under the pressure. The crisis of British Marxism may have inspired the most revolutionary stage of modern British poetry— and brought it to an end. This isn't directly part of my problem in tuning cohesion in my poems. But if we take the thesis “we will promote social mobility by dumbing-down poetry and withholding information from the lower classes,” I don't buy it! Not at all!

Writing a line is like designing something on Auto-CAD— I just keep on producing variations and looking at them from every direction until I find something that works. I am not conscious of why a variant does not “work,” or of where the variations come from. So, where do intuitive decisions come from? They may embody conscious activity— with its products which “sink” down and are drawn on, years later, when making intuitive decisions. This may have been unsuccessful conscious activity— an intellectual crisis faced with parts of a conceptual field which was never resolved. So theory played a role— including the theory I learnt from other people.

The superiority of the hypotactic style supposedly has to do with making the implicit explicit, whereas folk songs make everything clear without ever saying it. Although I do have a book called Text and Context, I feel that science has not reached this area (and the book is too difficult to actually read!) This area is of course where poetry has problems crossing the Atlantic

The most attractive thing in verse movement is the sense of boundless freedom. I am aware that I deviate from this— my verse often circles round, is frozen like a snake in a glass box which keeps pushing its head against the glass and can't move on. The I-subject is not simply enjoying glorious freedom— he is thwarted, blocked, and moving into a social structure which is arrayed against him. The ‘glass box’ ends motion but forces on us a qualitative shift— into thinking, into imagining the social order. If the snake could see itself in the glass, it would become a mammal.

You are probably aware that one of the key splits in the English poetry scene is between the London school (with great reliance on parataxis) and the Cambridge school (with insistence on complex syntax and argument structures.) I don't have any stylistic affinity with either school.

I don't know anything about LANGUAGE poetry, I admit. A crude view is that this is a label which is supposed to reduce several thousands of disparate cultural complexes to a single category— which we can then, supposedly, understand. But in fact they are several thousand different things, and that informational complexity is what sustains a cultural life (which might just burn out after a couple of years).

AF: The sexuality in your poems is raw and vital but seems un/de-politicized. One never gets the sense that you are flaunting it or grandstanding with it to get attention. How do you factor sexuality into your poems? Do sexual politics hold any interest for you?

AD: I don't think they're in the poems. I can't write about personal experience in terms of conscious knowledge and the beautiful civic ideals proposed to us. This is like making love while you are being projected onto a screen 100 feet high— the same gestures acquire a second meaning which is visibly wrong.

Talking about l'amour is a good way of annoying people. My poems have a strong flavor; but the expectation that people will be attracted to your poems about love is no more likely than the expectation that they will be attracted to your person. I wouldn't want to argue with anyone who disliked my love poems.

Let me quote from one of my favourite records, a song by doo-wop group The Dubs called "Where do we go from here? It took a lot of mistakes to ever get this far. But I want to know, I really want to know, where do we go from here?"

I used to have this experience with someone incredibly well-informed who would lecture me, late at night, about a hormone oxytocin, linked to trustfulness, suckling, orgasm, and internal pressure control and the release of fluids. I think she may have been making a point about how untrustworthy I was; but how much I might have learnt if I'd been able to stay awake. I always got confused and called it "oxytoxin." Oxytocin is the messenger which makes fish release roe, or spawn, vascular pressure displacing the ocean. So we're talking about a blissful regression in which we immerse and become weightless, the inner and outer waters flow together, and the ocean itself becomes a sexual medium, in which spates of precious fluids form spirals and constellations, sight is replaced by ripples flowing along the skin, personal identity and the time sense disappear. I can never remember this clearly. Sandor Ferenczi wrote a book *Thalassa* which says that we turn into fish during coupling. I thought it was nonsense. Fish? In Chinese poetry, love is symbolized by ducks. If I was devising a goddess of love, I might well make her a Mouse. Mice are addicted to Lurve, as we know. He was a very persuasive man.

My grandmother was told she would have to give up her job as a teacher if she got married. The State obliged her to become a housewife. This was a gross abridgement

of her civil rights. I could cite a hundred such stories, and it would be idiotic not to be a feminist. I accept that property, in our society, is used as the site for a fantasy of domination, and that property is used as a metaphor for the status and obligations of women. It would be inconsistent then to write books in which women don't suffer and where they are perfectly autonomous. Idealization of the situation also idealizes the male protagonist, something highlighted by feminists. I was most impressed by writers who questioned the monologue of male poets about women. The poem is my property, but I don't own someone else's experience. The gap between sex and love, between illusion and experience, between fusion of identity and domination, between me and you, is not an invention. If you stop idealizing the male figure, you can go on writing love poems. I realized that I could stay on air by writing about someone who wasn't unusually sensitive, who wasn't sophisticated, who missed his part in the music and made terrible mistakes. I could get away from writing reflexively by never rising above the immediate situation. I've always felt that if you present people with comfort and harmony, they don't engage, whereas if you present them with characters in a terrible fix, they will think it through carefully to try and find out where do we go from here. So you show Love going wrong, basically. The poem takes place at a point on the curve well before knowledge arrives, where ignorance and conflict and uncertainty are at their height. It's trapped at that point, where all the loose energy is. Then I cut to the next scene of conflict and improvisation.

The insights in my poems are drawn from people who were much more perceptive than I, who knew much more than I did, who saw the patterns and were generally my superior. These were the women I fell in love with. They explained things to me, often slowly and several times. This does raise the question of who owns the poem.

AF: The big debate among poets now seems to be about internet vs. print publishing. How do you feel about it? Do you prefer one to the other?

AD: From some point, before I was nine years old, I used to go to Loughborough market on Saturday mornings and buy American comics, Spiderman and things like that. And on Saturday mornings, still, I go to a library, a record shop, or a second hand bookshop. It's one of those physical things like, do you write from 8 till 12 mid-day or from midnight till 4. It's a habit which has scored itself deeper over 40 years, which gives me withdrawal problems if I don't do it. And I do prefer shopping for books to scanning the Internet.

The issues raised by the Internet are fascinating. Evidently people outside the zones of dense cultural activity, the capitals, got into it much more quickly. It was much more useful to Susan Schultz, in Honolulu, than to someone living in London. It was a leveler. There is an issue here about proximity—

What does literature deliver? How does it transmit a personality? Or is that Stone Age egoism?

What is the anatomy of group feeling? how does it decay as radius increases? What is the “inside”?

Identification (is this the same as “group feeling”?) is a Stone Age thing, fundamental to everything else yet resistant to theorizing— where attempts are of great interest, but really tentative and conjectural. It’s much deeper than literature, and literature could presumably be replaced by a new way of carrying out the archaic functions. Is there a connection between open and closed groups, and open and closed (impenetrable) texts? Should we talk about the design of the social network, rather than the design of the text?

I have just been looking at a vast anthology (Neofitsial’naya poeziya), all on the Internet, of 288 Russian samizdat poets. It was so hard getting samizdat books and magazines in the 1980s, now you can get thousands of pages of old samizdat poetry for the cost of your printer consumables. And, Russians are not interested in the era pre-1989 any more. This project is not commercially possible in print. I’ve also just spent loads of kronor on Swedish poetry of the 1940s, also bought via the I-net. Fantastic! Who was Sven Alfons?

I’m wondering how much small press poetry has to do with the daily intimacy of tiny in-groups. The stifling warmth of their mutual knowledge and rivalry. And the specialist shopping for magazines that are on sale, once, for a few hours, in one room. The ‘rich warm mud of Bohemian life.’ Going to a poetry weekend in Cambridge where two groups hung out in two pubs and refused any contact with each other, & you had to choose which one to be allied with. I propose the poem to a reader as a place they are in the center of—fearing they will see it as a margin to their own moving center.

I love shopping & am trying to write a poem “The History of Shopping” which starts with the Goths making the trip to Rome, seen as the inventors of tourism. Byzantine historians described the steppe peoples as insatiably acquisitive. It’s a sort of Imelda Marcos travelogue.

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PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Gabriel Gudding (Illinois, USA) and Adam Fieled (Editor, Philly, USA): *Waxing Hot poetics dialogue*

Editor:

- Adam Fieled

AF: You write, in *Rhode Island Notebook*, that "most literature is delusional, pretty, petty, and false." It seems like the composition of *R.I.N.* might have been a concerted, specific attempt to write something realistic, gritty, pertinent and true. Something, in other words, that transcends the artificiality of most literature. Is there a grain of truth to this?

GG: Maybe. Most poetry is a kind of verbal costume. An ideational schmaltz. An emotional uniform. A mental getup. This is just as true for avant garde and post-avant work as it is for mainstream stuff. Though I don't think the costumed life or the costumed mind is peculiar to poetry, necessarily, as a genre, it's no secret poetry tends more toward stylization than other modes. Poetry is the country music of literature. Given to schmaltz, nostalgia, over extension, socio-emotional reactivity, and alienation from material reality. The flipside is the hipster reaction to this: flaff, whathaveyou, langpo, N/Oulipian generativity (hipster maximalist masculinist compulsive text generation), irony as a modal approximation of self-awareness, and a conflation of experiment in form with soi-disant radical politics (the result being merely a more extravagant quietism). Our capacity for delusion is almost total.

AF: OK. I'm curious to what extent these kind of thoughts might have directed the composition of *R.I.N.* You include heaping gobs of concrete particulars: times, distances, amounts of gas, temperatures, highway and town names. Do you feel that these details "naturalize" the book somehow, give it stable/solid/palpably non-delusional roots?

GG: Good question. Not sure if they're less delusional but I can say they are less stylized. Maybe they do something not often done in poetry. These are the local details of your average person's world, least ways of my world. I wanted to include that stuff. Just the attempt to write the in-between, overlooked, peripheral—as a part of the greater truths, larger narratives, and more overt emotionality of most

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poetry. Not sure if these elements naturalize the book, but my hope is the sum total makes for a book that does not much move via typical poetry modalities. There is that huge long section around page 90 or so where I wrote down ALL the signs I saw from Ohio through Indiana and into Illinois. Horrifying. We *READ* all that stuff: it affects us. It moves us. It makes us. We need to become aware of that. I feel it needs to be in our literature. It is an important part of our disgusting history. I really do conceive of the book as a history. My daughter Clio was named for the muse of history. The book is dedicated to her.

AF: It is interesting that you allude to history, because the book not only documents itself via concrete, particular travel details, but via an engagement with the history of poetry. I think one of the most interesting aspects of this are the pastiche-poems included, which take on **Gerard Manley Hopkins**. It seems like you were taking Hopkins' purity and religiosity and "humorizing" them, not in a malicious or sardonic way, but playfully and tenderly. How do you think that, in the context of RIN, poetry history intersects with "our disgusting history"? In other words, you deal, in RIN, with several different kinds of history. I take "our disgusting history" as a reference to the ugliness of American highways: of roads, paved surfaces, road-signs. Your engagement with Hopkins is a nod to a different kind of history, a cultural one. Your book then becomes a kind of textual site where different histories intersect. What would you imagine to be the cumulative effect of these colliding histories? How did you envision these histories coming together, both for yourself as you were writing and for the reader? Was there an intended cumulative effect, something you were trying to show and/or demonstrate?

GG: There was a hoped for cumulative effect. But much was arrived at, discovered, in the writing. And the book became in one sense oppositional to the idea that the imagination is a refuge. We are told by poets for the last two hundred twenty years there is some kind of glorious refuge in imagination, imagination is this transcendent, palliative kingdom: the safety and order in the supreme fiction, the imagination as oasis, a good poem as a **Wallace Stevens'** Memorial vacation get-away, and that this capacity of fantasy is some kind of "palace of wisdom." This is complete bunk. Absolute delusion. It's the intellectual equivalent of tourism: the knowing, willful engagement in the delusive economy of deflected escape. It makes sense that Stevens constitutes the pinnacle of this romantic ideal — as his poetics is strongly related to the rise of modern tourism. Where Stevens thought he was speaking of the nature of mind and imagination and its relation to reality, he was in fact writing deeply classicist and racist poetry. This book stakes an oppositional poetics to **Stevens, Ginsberg, Spicer, Ashbery**, siding with **Loy, Lola Ridge, Rakosi, Niedecker**. I wanted to write the kitsch, the radio, the a-magical, the quotidia of civic life, the road sign — things normally kept from poetry — as a means of

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reminding myself how much stuff we IGNORE in order to pretend to touch the real or the supreme - or "the mind," as if the mind were this Ashberian numinous burning collagic machine of lyricism.

AF: This question, of what is real, and may be realistically portrayed in literature, can lead in many different directions. What I'm curious about is how it ties in for you with the idea of privilege. In lots of schmaltsy poetry, we see a privileged, patriarchal figure having some kind of epiphany. However, in fighting against this attitude, willfully structuring your poem so that ephemeral elements (road-signs, McDonald's, radio) take a prominent position, can it be argued that you are enacting a different form of the same privileged status? That is, do you find yourself to be in the position of telling the reader "what's really real"? Was an effort made to efface or subsume the (male) ego and its drive to direct, control, dominate?

GG: It's a fair question. Sure, that could be argued. Anything can be argued. But the book is not a case for the real, the true; it's not even, to my mind, a comment on "the poetic." What it is, for me, in its largest dimension, is the story of a family falling apart and a nation going insane. Those are mysteries. Ridiculously huge and never-ending conundra. I don't know how a nation goes insane. And though I know how a family falls apart, the WAY that it does so is a deep, terrifying mystery. At an ethical level, though, it's a book about suffering and how to endure it - and in fact how to flourish in it. At an aesthetic level, it is textured by what Bakhtin calls "primary speech genres" (road signs, radio utterances, bumper stickers, the makeshift reality of internal mental dialogue, embarrassing first draft crap), the book is perforce built on speech realities that fall outside what Bakhtin calls official speech. It is overtly badly stylized (poorly realized) speech. But nowhere does it touch on the nature of the real. It's just proffering the other things often left out of a book, a history, a politics, an organized "life": buildings the size of dust motes, blurry towns smeared into a chain of ramps and roadside islands. It says nothing about the way these things exist, just that they might. The towns we see from the road might exist. The people in the Hardees might exist. The rest stops might exist. The jerk in the adjacent car might. Your hands on the steering wheel might too. A way out of my sorrow might exist. A way out of literature might exist.

But at bottom the book (for me) is about the navigation of sorrow: how to anchor instead of grasp; how to sail instead of let go. I have no idea what it is for someone else. For my daughter Clio, I had hoped it would be a history, a partial history of what was happening to her family during a time of great sorrow.

AF: Partly I think it's the affectivity of the book which makes it so compelling. Without easing into sentimentality, it tells a real, heart-rending story in a narrative that's not always strictly linear, but that is traceable. However, the trend in the

academy now is all towards New Historicism: tying literature in to larger historical patterns that dictate the behavior and production habits of authors, albeit sometimes unconsciously, or subconsciously. If, where this book is concerned, you had to New Historicize yourself, how would you do it? Can you tie the affectivity of a “time of great sorrow” into a prevalent, comprehensible Zeitgeist?

GG: First, thank you for seeing the affective nature of it in that light. It’s heartening to know you’ve read it so well. Second, I see New Historicism as a literary *reception* movement coming to vogue in the late '80s and rising out of inter- and intra-disciplinary concerns about how to read (and write critically about) literature. I do not see it as a movement much affecting *production* concerns. So, the book is a history — which is not to say it was affected particularly by current trends in literary historiography.

But I see more what you're asking now — and I wouldn't call what you're asking me to do particularly "new historicism." Seeing the connections between "personal troubles" and "public issues" is precisely what **C. Wright Mills**, the great renegade sociologist, calls having a useful "sociological imagination." It's just good sociology. The book's appositions of national narratives and personal ones implicitly make this connection — sometimes uncannily. For instance, the day the driver's family decides on "divorce" is the day the US begins the invasion of Iraq. It's a coincidence, yes, but it's clear that the larger socio-emotional climate affects a family's weather. What a horrifying time in our history.

AF: Dovetailing with this, I'd like to bring up the larger issue of historicity, as it applies to your (and all of our) endeavors. How important do you think it is for poets in our day and age to develop, hone, and maintain a historical sense, both as regards their own reading and their literary production? To state this more clearly: is it worthwhile to regard ourselves as players in a potentially historical drama, or do you believe it more productive to (I'm paraphrasing Joyce) awake from the nightmare of history?

GG: I guess my answer depends on what you mean by "historical sense." I have a few friends, as well as a few former friends, who believe, despite their obscurity and in some cases because of their fame, that they are writing for the ages, who think history will exonerate them or uphold them, who feel their current lack of recognition will eventually be transmuted by play of decades into a trans-temporal audience or who feel their present recognition is logical and was inevitable. That's delusional. But both constitute a common pose, a frequent tactic, and a conventional gambit — the former especially I'd guess commonly seen among non-bourgeois writers. **Bourdieu** addresses this well in *The Field of Cultural Production*.

It's either delusion, on the one hand, or an expedient of aesthetic politics, on the other.

But if you mean is it a good idea to just try to have a relatively global sense of what's been written and why it's been written, then yes I think that's wise.

AF: Can you parlay your "global sense" into a précis of where you think poetry is going in 2008? Is "post-avant," in all its amorphousness, a viable entity and a worthy successor to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, or do you feel there are other currents currently existent that could lead experimental (or even mainstream) poetry down new, unexplored vistas?

GG: It's an interesting question. But I wonder about its intent. You seem to be suggesting that having a "global sense" about what's been written and what's being written necessarily implies having a market sense about what's the Next Hip Thing. Maybe I'm putting words in your mouth. Likely I have. In any case I feel that trying to know or trying to control the direction of the field is part of what Bourdieu calls the production of a collective misrecognition— a belief in "literature." This manufactured "cusp" or fore-guard is the site upon which the struggle for the monopoly of symbolic power concentrates. It's not a matter of direction (where the field is going); it's a matter of the illusion of direction created by continual literary rebranding (done in interviews, blog posts, anthologies, reviews, manifestoes, movements, etc).

I mean, basically there have been over the past 150 years a limited range of techniques that just keep getting relabeled and rebranded: collage becomes "cut up" becomes "flarf" or "flirph" or whatever it's called now; disjunctive anacoluthon becomes what **William James** called "automatic writing" and **Stein** takes that into cubist dada which is then rebranded via a different set of theoretical apparatuses (Frankfurt School) as L=A=N....; a hodgepodge of sleep-based techniques and collaborative aleatoric methods morph (thank goodness) with oppositional leftist politics into surrealism which then meld with the rightist political quietism of late modernism into deep image and ...?

This is a market. Markets need a predictive mindset. If "art" and "writing" cannot divest itself of this fascination with symbolic exchange-value in favor of a use-value, it will continue to be just another inverted extension of the economic system.

Too, markets need a projected null point that serves to mask the manufacture of collective misrecognition: the new; imagination; the originary; celebrity and celebration.

Is it possible to write and to think about writing in ways that do not create and maintain hierarchies of artistic domination and power? Is it possible to write without

belief in a universe of celebrants and believers? Is it okay to write without thinking oneself a potential

object of celebration? And after having written, is it possible not to vie for status as a consecrated writer or as a writer who displays his own performative disinterest in the field of production?

AF: You seem to be commenting, with a somewhat negative slant, on the phenomenon of literature as a market-place, a zone of commodities, advertisements, and perpetuated illusions. You have also pointed out a kind of fallacious veneer to the rationale of your friends and ex-friends that shun the spotlight, but dare to believe that their work might have lasting value. Do you see a contradiction here? In other words, if the literary market-place is not a desirable locale, and if obscurity is also not a desirable locale, is there a happy medium or a third realm that you find preferable, or that could balance the two?

GG: Adam, not to be obtuse, but I'm not sure what you mean by "viable." Or even what is meant by "post avant." The imaginary gestalt Silliman labeled "post avant" is I think a multipurpose fiction about which little can be said and a lot can be asserted. And that's the term's power. It's what Uwe Poerksen calls a plastic word: florid in connotation, imprecise in denotation.

But even if I did know what a post avant movement was, I probably wouldn't be qualified to answer your question about where it's going. I am not a believer in the dream of literature or the salutary originary power of the imagination or the notion that new stuff is best stuff: it's all new stuff. We just choose to fetishize some of it. Whether one movement follows another successfully is really of little interest to me. Whether writing is useful is to my mind a more salient question. So I don't see a third realm possible. There are no possible realms.

As to whether I think of my more ardent poet friends or acquaintances as "fallacious": no. I don't think of people caught within the dream of literature fallacious. I just think they are following the logic of the game they find themselves in. Part of that logic is belief — believing in the religion of literature — and part of that is the pretense not to believe. Performative indifference is part of an avant garde (or, as it's called now, "post avant") symbolic economy, just as the dream of what you call "lasting value" is part of a more established symbolic/financial economy of letters. And the machine has to turn: margin to center; acoustic to electric; Alan to Golding; outlaw to classic. The two different non-desirable-locales, as you call them, depend on each other. Sure you can find a viable third realm if you believe in Santa Claus. And lots of people do — and one can make the flock move this way or that way: there are lots of tactics and strategies for planting one's brand.

Take your pick. One can form a group, a "movement" — or go it alone and play the transgressor, the outlaw, the shaman, versions of the sacred heretic: all of these things work. They each have their tactical logic. None of it matters.

I was speaking of a kind of manufactured cusp, a fabricated verbal frontier that we are encouraged to accept as real and even necessary. So, that third realm you speak of is always the next big thing: it is the cusp, the bubble, the next wave. Your question was "where [I] think poetry is going..." specifically whether the term post avant is a "viable... and worthy successor" to lang-po. It's the same impulse relabeled. Lang-po was not itself a viable and worthy successor to confessionalism, nor it to modernism, nor it to the Victorian era, nor it to the literature of post-1848 American democratic nationalism.

But then again, I don't believe time exists either. So take the previous for what it's worth to you.

Instead of where post-avant poetry is going, I find myself these days wondering about why the Flarf movement is so white. Why "post avant" poetries are so white. Why is the Chicago innovative writing scene so white? Why for instance is there so little crossover between the scene surrounding the Palabra Pura reading series in Chicago and the experimental scene (Myopic series or Series A or Danny's Tavern). Why has there historically been so few women in the European and North and Latin American avant garde poetry scenes? Why is the spoken word scene at Nuyorican so much more ethnically and culturally diverse than the St Mark's crowd and why is the spoken word scene in Chicago whiter than white? Why did so few "experimental" poets write anti-war poems? How are some so sycophantic: why do they need an iterative white transgressive hero, a Ginsberg, a Spicer, a Berrigan, an Ashbery? or a white masculinely safe heroine, Stein, Moore, Bishop. Why do people keep reading the same writers over and over, even when they're ridiculously boring and shticky and predictable (Ashbery) or they know their poems by heart already? Why do so few study the anthropology and/or sociology of literary scenes?

AF: I agree that white hegemony within the poetry world is, in and of itself, an "undesirable locale," if we want to posit a state-of-affairs as a kind of place. How do you visualize a bridge being made, that might enable a multi-cultural element to be added to the present scenario (sorry for the buzz-word, couldn't resist)? Do you have any strategies that might enable the poetry world to broaden its cultural scope? You teach at ISU; do you buy in to the "think globally act locally" approach, and are there approaches you take in the context of your classroom that reflect an interest in manifestations of diversity, cultural heterogeneity, and the deflection of an assumed, white male canon?

GG: I guess I don't know that I have any answers beyond the obvious, which I offer at the risk of sounding like any of the following is easy: make on the one hand a pointed self-examination (as best as one is able to actually do that) about motives and influences and biases in order to uncover where I might be denying myself some really amazing work; study the sociology and anthropology of literature to better grow beyond the neoromantic fetish of authorship and the modernist fetish of text; and reach outward and into other writing cultures. I think we make/join/encourage hegemonies/big.samenesses because of our incessant habit of valuation. By which I mean we often seem to need/want things to be the same, or enough the same, so that we can better evaluate what surrounds us (or at least exercise/display our discerning taste) rather than constantly dealing with things/situations that defy/challenge our perceptual categories. And so those are some outward-directed practices that will help. But it's important not to stop there. It's important to understand that our very affect has broad-ranging political effects. Cultivate affiliative mind-states. Be willing not to be cool. By which I mean, notice and resist the play of power in the field of cultural production, understanding that hipness is merely a performative resistance that is itself a tactic, often marked by sarcasm, used to acquire cultural capital. Cultivate an interpersonal responsiveness and then retain that capacity to be surprised. Easy, right?

I think a really fruitful way of doing the above is to develop a loving heart. A loving heart is an open heart. An open heart catalyzes a flourishing, courageous mind. I do think Emerson is right when he says in "Friendship" that "our intellectual and active powers increase with our affection.

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PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Philadelphia, USA), Adam Fieled (Philadelphia, USA)

Editor:

- Adam Fieled

Adam Fieled: Hand in hand with the intellectual rigor of your poems is a deep sense of suffering, an awareness of futility and fragility. One might see in your work a “poetics of suffering.” Just as the Buddha said “all life is suffering,” do you feel that, in some sense, all poetry must be “suffering” (or “a suffering”) too?

Rachel Blau DuPlessis: One of the fascinating things about having *Drafts* read is hearing about what they see in the poems. (Hearing what they see.) People’s responses construct a multi-faceted polyhedron for me. It is also fascinating to hear what words people choose to talk about their feelings for this poem and for poetry in general. You have chosen several very freighted words to open this exchange, including using the term of the Buddha. So I have taken a deep breath, and looked at your words (“deep”; “suffering”; “futility”; “fragility”; “the Buddha”), and have re-engaged my sense of the poems.

I would say that suffering and fragility (your words) are close to feelings I have about some of the themes of the work, but this is combined with a resilience, resistance, and even a rather inflected joy and awe. “Futility” is your word. I think there is a lot of futility in life, even, in some moods, in all of it, but I couldn’t myself get involved in the 20 year long construction of a poem thinking to communicate sheer futility.

The tragic sense of life, the sense of sublimity and rage, is different from futility, after all. Another of the words you use is “must be” what poetry “must be.” Poetry, to be worth something, evokes many, many feelings in readers: structural feelings of pleasure and dastardliness, feelings of being overwhelmed by the force of language, a sense of leaping forward into a world and being contained in relation to the large world by the smaller world made in and by the poem. There is a lot of pleasure in the artfulness of art, even if some of the feelings evoked by a work are overwhelmingly difficult and sad and hard to manage. Hence I don’t think that all poetry must be “suffering.” I can’t wrap myself around that generalization.

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AF: Your work shows a clear and ever-present awareness of post-structuralist theory and practice. Yet you also freely incorporate standard devices like rhyme and alliteration. Are you comfortable with the dynamic tension between “hallowed” tradition and new-fangled theory? Do you find it stimulating?

RBD: Another observation about being interviewed by email to join the first observation. Since I don’t know you particularly well, it’s not yet clear what you mean by the terms in which you are invested. If you were to say even a little about what you mean by post-structuralist theory and practice, we could make sure that we are the same page. When I went to college and graduate school (Columbia), there was “no” theory; this means we were almost totally into an unquestioned paradigm formed by the New Criticism. I have by the way never given up my formal sense of the artwork learned under that rubric; it’s just not a pure formalist or purely aesthetic sense that’s ever at stake for me. Only as I exited from my formal education did theory emerge as a set of discussable positions, what I like to call theorizing practices. Or, say this another way: the political rupture of the late 1960s was also an intellectual rupture. This has meant, to me, that I am most engaged with the loop between theory and praxis coming out of feminism and gender thinking.

It’s been, therefore, a thrilling time to become self-educated in what people call theory, which I have always taken as a thinking through. I could thereupon tell you what positions and works have been interesting to me, but they all would fall in the in-between formed by a kind of spiritual yearning and a materialist base. This would first be positions taken up by and in feminist thinking including the theorizing of Virginia Woolf, plus key works of French feminism (Irigaray, Cixous) and also Spivak and Braidotti, all positions dealing with gender in culture; then positions taken up by echt post-structuralists, most emphatically Barthes, but also Blanchot— these are hard for me to sum up except as being a gloss on spiritual investments and ideological analysis at the same time; and third, the positions of the Frankfurt School, particularly Benjamin and Adorno, plus one very important Marxist pragmatist: Raymond Williams.

The feature of theory that fascinates me, and that I’ve tried to deal with a bit, is that only some of that evocative list of thinkers ever directly and assiduously treats the poem, poetry, the poetic text. (Obviously, the poet-critics are different in that!) However, I see no contradiction between this set of positions and any poetic tactics I might choose to use! Any rhetorics, formal tactics, choices I make, desires to sound inside language, tripping and torquing tradition are my informed choice. Of course it appears to some that using rhyme links you to tradition, but it could allow you to trump tradition, answer back, and so on. No formal “device” (or choice) has absolute content but situational, historically contingent meanings that get created and recreated inside a specific work.

AF: At one point in *Drafts*, a speaker says, “If I am not who you say I am, you are not who you think you are.” This cuts to the core of the political element in *Drafts*— the construction of identity through various “namings”, of the self and others. How does the construction of identity (as woman, poet, “speaker”, etc.) play into your poetics? Is the poem, or does the poem become, part of the poet’s “identity-construct”?

RBD: I sincerely think and hope that speaker was Ralph Ellison. It’s one of the citations in *Drafts* unchecked (or one of the unchecked citations). I cited it for the magnificent dialectics. (It’s in “Draft 48: Being Astonished” my poem concerning a whole generation of female experimental poets and all the different subject positions they might be imagined to have and to take up.) My identity? There are a lot of parameters to identity (class, race, gender, religious culture, job category, national location, social usefulness). I try to forget them all when I write. That doesn’t mean I am not engaging them, or engaging with them. I just try to work into them and beyond them at the same time. I know this is a paradox. That’s the paradox of writing. Of course the poem, a task and struggle as large as *Drafts*, becomes part of who I am now.

AF: Sense of place in *Drafts* seems to me multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, “numerous.” Is the voyage “inside times and inside pronouns” one with destination other than “a speaking” or “a writing”? Can you carry elements of this voyage into “dailiness” or is there an evanescence to it?

RBD: If I understand the question, you are asking does the poem—with its ethics and sense of being— affect my daily life. The answer is— sometimes. I think the poem comes from everything I am, and has also changed what I am.

AF: You devote a substantial amount of space in *Drafts* to a dialectical exploration of Adorno’s famed quote that (to paraphrase) to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Do you believe that statements of this sort, i.e. deliberately provocative statements, are a healthy part of cultural conversation, or merely a nuisance, or can they be both?

RBD: Your question refers to a poem called “Draft 52: Midrash” in the most recent book of *Drafts*, *Drafts 39-57, Pledge, with Draft, unnumbered, Précis* (Salt Publishing, 2004). The poems in this book are all dedicated to specific people, and constitute a personal pledge of engagement with the issues of historical tragedy and spiritual questioning that the poems as a whole set forth. However, “Draft 52: Midrash” is deliberately un-dedicated. This is a commentary on the Holocaust and on the genocidal, killing fields, and mass murder tasks that nazi-fascism has taken up, no matter where it is active.

One of the notable poems in that book, “Draft 52: Midrash,” makes an endless, unresolved gloss on Adorno’s sententia, After Auschwitz to write a poem is barbaric, taking his statement as an important ethical talisman. (His statement comes in an essay called “Cultural Criticism and Society”; it appeared in *Prisms*.) I truly thought his comment was beyond what would normally be seen as provocative in a cultural conversation (to use your words) and came from an emotional and political space far, far beyond anything that could be called nuisance. There are always some people who mouth off about poetry and what poetry should or should not do, and articulate orders for poets but Adorno is far beyond being one of those people. His statement comes from the most wrenching revulsion, grief and human anguish. Therefore, because it was so absolutist, I respected it as such. However, because it was so absolutist (plus annihilating, as morally wrong or uncivilized, my desire to write poetry), I felt it had to be discussed. Not answered, discussed.

It is very important to me that this poem is called “midrash”. This word evokes a textual strategy from Hebrew interpretive practices. Midrash originally meant a continuous and generations-long commentary on sacred texts by those— males, in Orthodox tradition— invested with appropriate spiritual authority and learning. In writing this particular midrash on Adorno, I am taking a secular text, in the post-Holocaust context, examining it as a woman untrained in any philosophical tradition of argument, but someone who is invested in the notion of thinking in poetry. The gesture is therefore filled with critique.

Actually, *Drafts* as a whole project alludes to— but secularizes— this genre of serious commentary, spiritual investment, and continuous gloss. By the title *Drafts*, I am signaling that these poems are open to transformation, part of ongoing processes of construction, self-commentary, and reconstruction. This is similar to the collective processes of midrash. And, while some in individual Drafts can be very funny and witty, the whole project has thematic and emotional investments centering on loss, struggle, and hope, on the unsayable and “anguage,” the language of anguish.

conducted by e-mail, late 2005-early 2006

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P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Bob Perelman (Philadelphia, USA), Adam Fieled (Philadelphia, USA)

Editor:

- Adam Fieled

AF: I was very touched by the intimacy and playfulness of the poems in *PlayingArtist Posts Bodies*. The poems are all written in a unique, spare, lyrical voice. Could you talk a little bit about how this voice developed?

BP: I feel like I did something I hadn't done before in that book, and I was really very knocked out by Francie [Shaw]'s paintings. For a couple of years before I wrote the poems, I'd been thinking of trying to do a collaboration with her based on those paintings. We had collaborated in the past. I was very involved in the production of the paintings, in that I would see each one that she was doing, we would talk about which postures worked best. For a few of them I made suggestions (like, turn this guy upside down, etc.) I'm not claiming much credit for the paintings, just to say that I was engrossed, as she was making them. So I'd been thinking about, how would I write poems of or for those paintings, and I tried quite a bit. At first I tried to imitate them formally in some way. The canvases are square, so I tried to write square poems— four quatrains of four word lines, and I think I even (one or two times) arranged them in two columns, really trying to make them square like the

paintings. I wasn't terribly happy with the result. Then I concentrated on a more emotional level, and the paintings made me feel all sorts of things— scenarios, moods, tones of voice. I would show my attempts to Francie, and she often told me I was seeing only half of the painting. She was clear that the two figures were one gesture or mood or state of mind. She wanted to make sure I tried to get those complexities into the poems, and that helped me turn the corner. At some point, I really started to allow myself to say emotionally complicated, contradictory things. I opened up to the spirit of the paintings. Once I got onto that frequency, things went much faster, and I'd often write a couple a day, after working for more than a year on trying to approach them. Once they were written, I tried to cut things way down. That was getting back to the original impulse— to imitate the paintings' formality.

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The paintings are incredibly compact, so I had to make the poems as compact as could. That was something new for me— writing short poems.

AF: Talking about models— as I was reading *Playing Bodies*, I often thought of e.e. cummings. Was he in there somewhere?

BP: It may not be fair, but cummings has been on my shit list for decades. I liked him a lot when I was young. He was one of the first poets I ever liked, so I suppose possibly he's influenced me subconsciously. I have problems with his sentimentality and his anti-Semitism. I cut Pound incredible slack because I understand the mechanics of his anti-Semitism. For some reason I don't cut cummings any slack at all. He rubs me the wrong way.

AF: You write, "Aliens have inhabited my aesthetics for/ decades..." It seems that in many poems, "Confession" here quoted being the most obvious example, you try and balance the post-modernist's rejection of confession and the Romantic's penchant for same. Do you think this is relevant or applicable? If so, would you like to talk a little bit about this binary and the tensions it creates in your writing? Is there, perhaps, a kinship with John Ashbery lurking around this territory for you?

BP: I know that I was being (on the surface) sarcastic, transgressive, contrary in writing that poem. It was the sly thought of adopting a so-called alien perspective, naive alienation. The "slimier-than-thou-aestheticians" are the indirect result of my having taken my boys to see *Independence Day*, where the aliens are decidedly slimy.

AF: You've made it clear that, as a poet, you try and avoid "elemental words." Could you discuss elemental words? Does elemental merely mean overused or trite, or is there something more subtle being denoted?

BP: Elemental words are essentializing words, words that are meant to be deeper than language— often geo-political racial stuff, i.e. "American," etc. "I am American and you're not." It's transcendental tags that get used all the time. For me, making poetry lively and healthy involves teasing and tweaking, challenging the notion of the poetic, not being worshipful. So "elemental" in unchangeable— you're not allowed to change it. I didn't think of that way of saying it— "elemental"— until I was writing the introduction to *Ten to One*. "Elemental" isn't an elemental word for me.

AF: You're quoted as saying, "poets most usefully exist in hearing the variety of society's speech and responding to that variety." I was wondering if you could explore this a little bit— what, for you, is the richest societal domain a poet can mine— streets, bars, universities?

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BP: All of the above, I suppose. As many as possible, although you have to do a lot of translating sometimes. Putting different language universes in touch with each is a basic necessity these days. There has to be the barest hint of a hinge between one side of a language universe and another. The world of books is not unpoetic and the street is not unpoetic, and if I use bookish words, I try to make a hinge or an articulation so that you know what I'm talking about. If it's too explanatory then it gets very cumbersome, but I think there's a value in doing it if you can do it deftly, and it can be a real source of strength.

AF: In your poem "Days," you write, "Some days you skip/ Come back to them/ Later, others never occur." In a compressed way, these lines seem to posit a sort of Proustian view of time. I often get that feeling from your poems— of time being essentially elusive, untraceable. The poems, then, are an attempt at tracing how time-parts fit together. Is there any truth in this reading?

BP: That seems like a good description. It is something I think about all the time—the present moment of writing. It strikes me that poetry, though not ephemeral, is thrown into the present more so than other activities. It's the most old-fashioned art. Again, it's a tricky balance, a question of deftness. I have a prejudice against "poetic piety."

AF: I noticed that the Ezra Pound segment of *The Trouble With Genius* seemed very deeply felt. Is there a sense of deep affinity with Pound? Does this affinity make it difficult to face his sketchy-at-best politics?

BP: Pound was one of the crucial poets in the dawning of my interest in poetry. Somehow, I got hold of *ABC of Reading* when I was a kid. It made poetry seem very doable and fascinating, like, "what could be more interesting than this?" I came to poetic consciousness at the tail end of the New American Poetry world, and that's a "New Directions" world, all of Pound's work coming out of New Directions. It's a sanitary presentation of Pound. It was possible to read him and not get that he's a Fascist or an anti-Semite. You can read right past it and you can see he's being irascible, and you're never quite sure what or who he's irascible at, and the systematic nature of his prejudices doesn't show up. I realized at a certain point that it organized his thinking, anti-Semitism. When Pound came to London— Ezra is a very Jewish name, and he had red hair—he was always telling people, "I'm not Jewish, I'm not Jewish." It became very important to me to figure out what was going on with Pound, because he instigated (that's his word, ultimately) much of what was important to me personally and to most American poetry.

AF: Do you ever suffer spasms of doubt about the importance of poetry and art in general? Is the Samuel Beckett syndrome ("I can't go on, I'll go on") once that you can

empathize with?

BP: Yes, I certainly suffer spasms of doubt. I don't have spasms of doubt about the importance of poetry: there, I am a true believer. I suffer spasms of doubt about my own poetry. I'm not a happy camper when a poem isn't finished. I remind myself that I have written stuff that I like.

AF: Lately I've been messing around with the concept *rheto**poeia*. This, for me, is the rhetorical impact of any given poem, how it convinces us of its own substantiality. Do you think poems need this sort of justification? Does a poem need to convince us, on a rhetorical level, that it is somehow necessary or justified in its existence?

BP: I'm suspicious of generalizations. I've used the word "rhetoric" a bunch— rhetoric as a source of poetic power. But it's one of the easiest words to misunderstand. Rhetoric is also a synonym of "bullshit!" But rhetoric in the old sense— structures used in addressing a single person, or a group of people, or a situation, when that's what rhetoric means— remains crucial. The environments in which poems exist are so complicated and fast moving that sometimes when every poem is "convincing us of its own substantiality," it feels like endless playings of the authenticity card. Like in "Confession": "Come on and read me for the inner you I've locked onto with my cultural capital sensing-device looks..." Sometimes the best rhetoric (in the sense that I think you're using it) is not worrying about rhetoric. But poems never escape the environment of reading and writing. So, no final answer to the question.

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